

Against Amateur Economies

Spec Work Competitions and the Anti-spec Movement

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The rise and rise of the amateur cultural producer has been greeted with a spectacular amount of celebratory rhetoric, in both popular and academic writing.¹ Despite some criticisms of amateur participation in cultural economies—because it results in inferior quality productions compared to the fruits of professional labour,² because participatory, amateur cultures are not really participatory,³ or because new opportunities for profit-making and control result from the extraction of data from amateur content⁴—optimistic, celebratory discourses of the amateur prevail. This article counterbalances the dominant celebratory discourse surrounding amateur economies by focusing on some of its more negative consequences. Specifically, it concentrates on spec work competitions and the anti-spec movement within the field of design.

Spec work, short for speculative work, involves people producing goods, usually cultural goods, without a guarantee of getting paid. For some designers, the most troublesome manifestation of spec work is the spec work competition, which brings amateur and professional designers together in competition with each other

for payment for a design job which they all undertake. In this sense, the spec work competition is one manifestation of the amateur economy. Spec work competitions mobilise a process that is becoming increasingly central to amateur economies: crowdsourcing, or the outsourcing of tasks historically carried out by paid employees to the collective labour of a group of volunteers.

Crowdsourced speculative work competitions are criticised by anti-spec design professionals for a number of reasons. These include that such competitions devalue design; they offer unfair compensation; they can result in problematic lawsuits; they employ minors; and they lead to a host of unethical practices, by clients, competition hosts and designers. Instead of participating in speculative work competitions, therefore, critics propose *pro bono* work as a more ethical alternative. Here, I argue that such responses to spec work are not simply the panicked reactions of a profession under threat of invasion by amateur troops, as is implied in some academic commentary. Rather, critical responses to spec work need to be understood in relation to the professional ethics of designers, which many feel are thrown into question by this particular amateur economy.

As well as countering celebrations of the amateur, this article highlights the role played by ethics and values in professional creative labour, building on other discussions of ethics and cultural work.⁵ At the same time, it exposes the tensions that arise when amateur and professional workers, paid and unpaid work, are brought together. And it draws attention to yet another example of the increasingly precarious conditions of creative work, which have otherwise been well documented.⁶ Finally, the article contributes to debates about amateur economies valuable empirical research with professional media producers about the impact of amateur production activities on their work, which to date has been somewhat lacking.

First, I map out the rise of amateur cultural production, with particular attention to the networked environments which facilitate crowdsourced activities like spec work competitions. I then go on to describe spec work initiatives, before discussing critical responses to them from within the design professions. I draw on online material from anti-spec campaigns such as NO!SPEC (<http://www.no-spec.com/>), AntiSpec (<http://antispeccom/>) and SpecWatch (<http://www.specwatch.com/>).

specwatch.info/), as well as dialogues with people working in the anti-spec movement.

—THE RISE AND RISE OF THE AMATEUR

The term amateur is used to describe a person who engages in particular pursuits without pay or formal training because of a passionate interest in, or love of, the pursuit—the word does, after all, derive from the French ‘amateur’, or ‘lover of’. The recent rise of the culture-producing amateur is generally associated with the birth of Web 2.0 and the possibilities for participation that related technologies opened up. Benkler’s *The Wealth of Network* and Bruns’ *Blogs, Wikipedia, Second Life and Beyond* are two of the best-known commentaries on the rise of amateur cultural production in networked, Web 2.0 environments. Benkler celebrates the new set of technical, economic, social and institutional relations that result from the networked information economy, which lead to radically decentralised non-market production and ‘increased practical individual autonomy’ and create a production space for the amateur to occupy.⁷ He claims that ‘in the networked information environment, everyone is free to observe, report, question, and debate, not only in principle, but in actual capability’.⁸ Benkler presents a detailed and convincing list of examples of amateur production activities that back up his claim, including content generation systems like Wikipedia; relevance, accreditation and tagging systems such as those found on Amazon and Google; Project Gutenberg, an archive of free electronic books; projects based on shared processing and storage capacity like SETI@home; and peer-to-peer networks like BitTorrent and Kazaa. This impressive list would seem to testify to the growing value of amateur involvement in cultural production.

Like Benkler, Bruns highlights the ways particular characteristics of Web 2.0, such as its information-pull techniques, widely available tools of production and distribution and easily shareable and modifiable content, lead to the inevitable emergence of an already-more-active user. Using the web, writes Bruns, implies ‘active expression and communication of views, values, beliefs, ideas, knowledge and creativity’⁹—produsage rather than usage. Because of this, the production value chain is transformed. There are no longer producers and consumers, or professionals and amateurs, but rather participants, sometimes using, sometimes producing—producers, among whom all is equal: ‘producers and users of media

content are both simply nodes in a neutral network and communicate with each other on an equal level'.¹⁰ The rise of the produser robs the media industries of their 'position at the privileged end of the production value chain'; they are reduced 'to the level of all other participants in the networks'.¹¹ Produsage, therefore, 'is likely to bring about ... the casual collapse at least of those of the established media powers which are unable to change their game fast enough to keep up with the new forms of content creation now found to be viable'.¹² Such is the impact of amateur activity on professional cultural production.

At the same time, both Bruns and Benkler recognise that increased amateur production activity is changing the ways that *some* proprietary media firms engage with end-users, ever more active, productive and expectant of increasing involvement. For Bruns, crowdsourcing is one positive example of the commercial embrace of produsage and of firms responding well to these challenges. In the few years that have passed since Bruns' book was published, crowdsourcing different forms of technical, creative and cultural labour has become well-established. Examples include Amazon's Mechanical Turk, a service that allows companies to post tasks (such as writing product descriptions), known as human intelligence tasks, or HITs, and individuals offer to complete these tasks for a financial reward determined by the task-setting company.¹³ Twitter's bird logo was famously crowdsourced for only \$6 through iStockphoto, as were translations of aspects of Facebook and LinkedIn.¹⁴ Other forms of labour which have been crowdsourced include the generation of product ideas. Computer company Dell, for example, runs IdeaStorm, which allows its users to suggest product ideas, some of which eventually get built and shipped.¹⁵ Spin-offs from crowdsourcing include crowdfunding, such as practiced by the online collaborative film community Wreckamovie, which crowdsources finance for film making as well as film production tasks.¹⁶

Crowdsourcing ventures like these are welcomed by Bruns because they serve to make the 'nodes in the production network' equal. Yet most crowdsourced tasks have historically been carried out by paid employees; therefore crowdsourcing is likely to affect professional workers in ways that are potentially problematic. To date, little empirical research has been carried out to examine the responses of professional cultural producers to the rise of amateur production practices of the

kind that are sometimes captured through crowdsourcing. In Jenkins' *Convergence Culture* there is a brief discussion of how Lucasfilm responded to amateur productions that drew on material from *Star Wars* in which Jenkins suggests that the games branch of the company accommodated them and the film branch attempted to suppress them.¹⁷ Within journalism scholarship, more extensive research has been carried out into the range of ways amateur activity has an impact on paid professionals, such as journalists' negotiations of their relationships with users; the challenges of amateur content for newsrooms; and journalists' perceptions of the effects of amateur content on newsroom norms, values and routines.¹⁸ Further such research, and the questions it asks of amateur–professional relationships, is needed in a broader range of creative and cultural industries.

Benkler and Bruns offer optimistic analyses of such ventures, but contrasting, critical voices have begun to surface that point to some of the problems with amateur economies. One such criticism relates to quality. Keen's book, *The Cult of the Amateur: How Blogs, MySpace, YouTube and the Rest of Today's User-generated Media are Killing our Culture and Economy*, is a polemic against the quality of amateur cultural content, in which Youtube clips are found wanting when compared to classical cinema.¹⁹ As the subtitle suggests, the banality of amateur content across a range of social media is read as a threat to cultural standards: this is the 'threat' of amateur activity read rather differently. In contrast, Benkler argues that although the quality of amateur production may be debatable, the act of producing culture makes people better 'readers, listeners, and viewers of professionally produced culture', because culture is more transparent and malleable, and because such practices lead to the emergence of a critical, participatory folk culture.²⁰ In the case of spec work, professional designers' concerns are not so much about a reduction in the quality of creative outputs that results from amateur involvement, but rather about the dubious nature of the processes by which this involvement is mobilised and their damaging consequences. If the quality of design produced through spec work is reduced, it is not because the wrong people are being allowed to produce culture—which is the implication of Keen's argument—but because of the problematic processes by which these particular aspects of culture are produced. I say more about this below.

A more significant criticism of amateur cultural production questions whether participatory, amateur economies are indeed participatory or amateur. For example, in his study of iStockphoto, Brabham found that participants in the iStockphoto community were both homogenous and elite, not reflecting the diversity of users suggested by Benkler's notion that 'anyone, anywhere, for any reason' can participate in networked social production.²¹ Van Dijck highlights the low numbers of active participants in amateur production cultures with reference to the (scientifically unproven) '1% rule': 'if you get a group of 100 people online then one will create content, 10 will "interact" with it (commenting or offering improvements) and the other 89 will just view it'.²² Furthermore, van Dijck argues that it is important 'to distinguish different levels of participation in order to get a more nuanced idea of what participation entails'.²³ This is because user production activities take place on 'a variable scale of labour relations', she argues, with a range of contractual forms and a diversity of locations on the amateur/professional spectrum.²⁴ In the case of one particular kind of design, web design, this is certainly the case. People who are active in produsage communities, participating in FLOSS (free/libre open source software) or other amateur or unpaid design activities, and people who earn money designing websites are not necessarily two distinct groups of people, despite the tendency in some literature to imply this is the case.²⁵ Instead, web designers participate in these activities on 'a variable scale of labour relations', as van Dijck suggests. In proposing that it is more productive to attend to the specificities of amateur/participatory production practices than to simplistically label all participants as equal nodes in a network, van Dijck points to some of the questions that the anti-spec movement and this article engage with, such as: What are the terms of participation in so-called amateur production? Which terms of participation are acceptable and which are not?

Another significant criticism of amateur cultural production focuses on the exploitative conditions in which such production takes place. Tiziana Terranova was among the first to recognise this in her widely-read article 'Free Labour'.²⁶ Terranova acknowledged that free labour is willfully given and enjoyed in digital, amateur economies. But she also hinted at the arduous conditions experienced by the armies of volunteers working, for example, as chat hosts for AOL, through her evocative terminology of 'NetSlaves' working in '24-7 electronic sweatshops' and

feeling the 'pain of being burned by digital media'.²⁷ More recently, acknowledging the important contribution made by Terranova's seminal article, Hesmondhalgh²⁸ asked if free labour is always necessarily exploitative, pointing to a range of types of 'free' labour which are willfully given and enjoyed (to use Terranova's terms), such as football coaching or playing music, but which, he argues, cannot be deemed to be 'exploitative' in the same way that other forms of free labour can be. For Hesmondhalgh, the internship system, rapidly growing across the globe, is a much more troubling example of free labour than, say, Facebook users 'liking' products and therefore producing data that has value for commercial companies. Ross Perlin's *Intern Nation* provides a comprehensive account of the problem of internships.²⁹

Here, I bring together van Dijck's argument that we need to acknowledge the ways in which types and conditions of amateur activity vary with Hesmondhalgh's suggestion that some forms of free or amateur labour are of greater concern than others. Designers themselves attend to such differences. Elsewhere, I have argued that (web) designers respond positively to forms of amateur production that do not undermine professional values, such as user-generated content produced for the websites that they design, which is seen as something to be curated.³⁰ Designers' responses to this kind of amateur activity differ from their responses to spec work for the reasons hinted at by Hesmondhalgh and van Dijck: the former is of less concern because it is not seen to undermine professional ethics and because the terms of participation are considered acceptable. The ethics and values of designers therefore play a significant role in designers' negotiation of amateur activity. Studies in journalism, cited above, have also found that professional journalistic values play a role in how journalists engage with amateur activity. The ethical formation of cultural workers influences their responses to distinct forms of amateur production, which therefore need to be differentiated. This proposal underlines the discussion in the rest of this article.

In this discussion I build on recent scholarship that might be said to represent a 'turn to values' within cultural industries studies.³¹ This scholarship highlights the role played by the ethics of individual cultural workers in the ways they approach their work, and points to the values that underlie notions of professionalism in different fields of cultural work. Following in this tradition, I argue that critical

responses to spec work from within the design profession need to be understood in relation to the professional ethics and values of designers, which some feel are thrown into question by this particular form of amateur activity.

—SPEC WORK COMPETITIONS AND THE ANTI-SPEC MOVEMENT

Spec work competitions within the design industries usually work like this: clients post design contests, participants submit design ideas and the winning design receives a prize, a sum of money decided by the client. 99designs, a company with offices in the United States, United Kingdom, Australia and Canada, is one company that hosts spec work competitions. On its website, it describes itself as ‘the number 1 marketplace for crowdsourced, creative design’. An introductory video explains the process as follows:

With 99designs, you get dozens of designers to work on your project. We help you host a design contest, where a crowd of designers compete to give you the design you love, or your money back. Here’s how it works. Tell us what you need—logo, business card, website, or even product packaging, then tell us how much you’d like to pay. That’s right, you decide how much you pay. The more you offer, the more design concepts you’ll see. Within hours, designs begin to pour in. After that, tell everybody what you like and what you don’t like, so the designers can improve their designs. After seven days, you’ll have pages of designs from dozens of designers. Then comes the really fun part. Check out all the designs until you find the perfect match. Rest assured, if you don’t get a design you love, we’ll give you your money back. 99designs is simply the best way to get graphic design done affordably, and with no risk.³²

According to the company’s US website, more than one hundred thousand projects had been launched on the site at the time of writing (January 2012). A total of \$471,592 was on offer on 1,533 open projects, and an average of 117 designs per project were being produced. Over one million dollars had been paid out in the previous month. A couple of years earlier, in February 2010, 99designs claimed to have almost sixty thousand participants, had run more than thirty-seven thousand contests, received 3,674,262 designs and awarded \$9,404,789 in prize money.

99designs has been subject to particularly vociferous attack by designers taking an anti-spec stance. Criticisms levelled at 99designs and other companies hosting spec work competitions are numerous, and can be summarised as follows: they devalue design; they offer unfair compensation; they can result in problematic lawsuits; they employ minors; and they lead to a host of unethical practices, by clients, competition hosts and designers themselves. I say more about each of these below.

The main criticism of speculative work competitions like those hosted by 99designs is that such initiatives fail to acknowledge the value of design. Mocking the 'value' that 99designs attaches to design work at the Future of Web Design conference in London in 2008, Australian designer Brett Welch suggested that dividing the total prize money by the total number of designs submitted would give an indication of just how much 99designs (de)values design. Taking the second set of figures presented above, that would mean: \$9,404,789 prize money / 3,674,262 designs = just under \$2.56 per submitted design. Although this does not reflect actual amounts paid out, it was used to suggest that the company attached very little value to the labour of design.

Anti-spec campaigners argue that spec work competitions devalue design because they fail to acknowledge fully the labour involved in the design process. Many designers argue that 'design is only partly decoration'.³³ Design is primarily problem solving, and visual design should start only after extensive communication between client and designer, which, in turn, should clarify precisely what problems need to be solved. As the website of one anti-spec organisation, NO!SPEC, states, the design process is 'more than simply tapping at a keyboard or clicking a mouse. It's about understanding the nature of a communication challenge and then using one's brain to find the appropriate solution.'³⁴ Spec work competitions fail to acknowledge this, leaping into the design process at the 'decoration' phase, it is argued. Clients lose out because, according to some critics, in the absence of communication, designers cannot thoroughly research the visual communication challenge being posed, and therefore cannot produce an appropriate design solution for the client. So poor quality results not because of *who* is doing the designing (non-professionals, in many cases), as Keen suggests, but because of the process by which it is done.³⁵ Designer and author David Airey points out:

When designers deal with clients, they build a relationship. This relationship begins from the very first impression one has of the other, and ideally continues for many years.

As the client, you should know that your designer values your business. They're not providing you with a design based purely on aesthetics, and one that took perhaps 30 minutes to create. They're looking deep into your business plan, your company mission, your background, your way of dealing with people, and many other aspects your brand.³⁶

What is lost in spec work competitions, according to their critics, is design professionalism: critics like Airey point to the value of designers' professional expertise in *communication*, which they argue is at the heart of design, yet which has no place in spec work.

A second way in which spec work competitions are seen to devalue design is through their unfair compensation for the work done. In other words, the pay is low. AIGA, the professional association for designers, states on its website:

professional designers should be compensated fairly for the value of their work ... AIGA acknowledges that speculative work—that is, work done prior to engagement with a client in anticipation of being paid—occurs among clients and designers. Instead of working speculatively, AIGA strongly encourages designers to enter into projects with full engagement to continue to show the value of their creative endeavor. Designers and clients should be aware of all potential risks before entering into speculative work.³⁷

NO!SPEC puts it like this: 'any contest that expects a designer to work for free ... encourages the undervaluing of a designer's labor, which ultimately undermines the quality of any professional workplace'.³⁸

Spec work competitions therefore devalue design because they pay a small amount of money for only part of the job and so fail to recognise the range of work involved in the design process. They also devalue design because they pay only part of the workforce involved in the job, as only the competition winner receives financial reward, not the other entrants, who number more than one hundred per competition in the case of 99designs. The NO!SPEC website poses this question to

clients thinking of starting a design competition: 'Would you work for free with the hope of POSSIBLY being properly compensated?'³⁹ The promotion of this particular kind of 'free labour' through spec work competitions is fiercely criticised, described by NO!SPEC as 'a disreputable practice in and of itself'. Critics of spec work further emphasise this point by comparing spec work processes in design industries with the operations of other trades. In response to an article proclaiming the benefits of a logo design contest for a teen suicide prevention organisation, one commentator asked if the author would pay only one of twelve mechanics who fixed his car.⁴⁰ Another said: 'No doubt Eric [the author] is perfectly willing to post HIS job ... and see if someone is willing to take a little less money to do what he does?'

As well as devaluing design work and forcing down pay, spec work competitions are criticised because of the potentially damaging legal consequences they present. In a blog post titled 'Don't design on spec', leading web designer Jeffrey Zeldman points out that AIGA, quoted above, has extensive archives detailing legal cases that have resulted from spec work. In many cases, submitted spec work is rejected, only for the 'client' to publish startlingly similar design work, produced by another, cheaper designer at a later date—and lawsuits often follow. Zeldman summarises such incidents with this fictional account:

Per Acme Anvil Co.'s request, Joe's agency designs comps on spec in hopes of winning the Acme redesign project.

Acme Anvil Co. informs Joe's agency that someone else got the job.

Six months later, Acme Anvil Co. launches its redesigned website. Joe's VP of new business visits the site and discovers that it looks similar to one of the supposedly rejected designs Joe's agency had submitted.

Joe's agency calls Joe's attorneys. A nasty lawsuit ensues. No matter who wins the suit, it will be costly and annoying—a drag on resources and morale—for all. If Joe's agency wins, word goes out that they are the kind of agency that sues if they don't get a job. If Joe's agency loses, they may have to lay off staff or close their doors. All because they were willing to design on spec⁴¹

In this fictional representation of many real-world cases, legal problems arise because of a lack of clearly defined usage rights. NO!SPEC points out that participants in spec work competitions often have to sign a contract waiving their

rights to their own creative work, passing them over to competition hosts. This contrasts sharply with the practice common in professional relationships, which involves the client and designer specifying the rights of usage of design work in an initial contract. In the absence of such clearly specified arrangements, competition hosts or clients can employ cheaper designers to modify submitted designs and pass them off as their own, without much fear of legal retribution. An example of ill-defined usage rights can be seen in a brochure promoting a student spec work competition in the north of England in 2011, called Two Birds One Stone. Here, clients, or 'brand partners', were encouraged to participate in the competition because they would benefit from 'more campaign ideas than an infinite amount of monkeys could produce with an infinite amount of brainstorm'.⁴² With these words, the brochure suggested that brand partners might build on ideas presented by losing students, without the students getting any credit for their work or having any legal recourse. Thus there are negative legal, as well as financial, consequences of designing on spec.

A further criticism of spec work competitions focuses on their engagement of minors. Design blogs *Logo Design Love* and *The Logo Factory* have both drawn attention to the age of so-called designers submitting to spec work initiatives like 99designs. They have pointed out that 99designs promotes itself as a world leading design marketplace, yet some designers are as young as eleven years old.⁴³ As Steve Douglas puts it, writing on *The Logo Factory*, 'Spec work websites pitch the work of 11-year-olds as a viable alternative to hiring professionals.'⁴⁴ Both these blogs display screengrabs of the profiles of members whose ages range from eleven to fifteen as evidence. Douglas suggests that many more child participants may lie about their ages, in order to be taken seriously in spec work competitions. A post titled 'The kiddie designers of 99designs' on Logo Design Love refers back to 99designs' self-promotion as a world-leading design marketplace with the following assertion: 'I don't know what your definition of a leading business is, but I'd hazard a guess it doesn't include said leader collecting its share of payment up-front, then having children provide the service, with each kid merely hoping to get paid.'⁴⁵ These practices raise further legal issues, such as whether appropriate child labour laws for the under eighteens are taken into account. The illegal employment of minors is of course an ethical as well as legal issue.

Thus although crowdsourcing is widely understood as a practice that outsources work to the non-professional crowd, spec work organisations often attempt to obscure the amateur character of their operations, such as the involvement of children in their competitions. 99designs and similar companies such as CrowdSpring describe their ‘community members’ as designers; it is clearly not in their interests to highlight that significant numbers of minors and amateurs are included in their numbers. Indeed, many anti-spec commentators point out that the majority of *professional* designers would not participate in spec work competitions, further suggesting that the large numbers of ‘designers’ on spec work sites are indeed non-professionals. Spec work competitions could be seen as amateur economies masquerading as professional, with terms of engagement that are considered both unethical and potentially illegal.

Spec work competitions are criticised for the unethical practices that result from them on the part of clients, competition hosts and designers. Some of these practices have already been discussed, such as the use of submitted designs without payment to, or recognition of, the people who created them. Such criticisms often come from people who have participated in spec work contests, as witnessed in a post submitted to NO!SPEC about one person’s spec work experiences.⁴⁶ Here, the author argued that contest holders frequently abandon contests, never declaring a winner or awarding a prize, claiming that none of the hundreds of submissions to their \$100 contests are good enough. What’s more, she claims, contest holders either fail to communicate with designers, give misleading feedback or accept low bids under the table.

The author of this post also criticises spec work participants for plagiarising, ‘trash talking’ other designers or for underbidding. By pitting designers against each other ‘like roosters in a ring’ spec work competitions inevitably result in plagiarism, she suggests, because plagiarism makes it possible to crank out a large number of designs, which is necessary to earn a living when payment for each design is between \$100 and \$300.⁴⁷ In Douglas’s blogpost about the age of spec work participants, discussed above, he points out that accusations between participants are rife in discussion forums about individual competitions on spec work sites—and often foul-mouthed. As he suggests, this is not an ideal environment for children to learn about the design ‘profession’.⁴⁸

Competition hosts are also unethical, suggest critics, pointing out that hosts pay designers only a small fraction of the total fee claimed from clients. NO!SPEC compares spec work competitions to sweatshops, 'where the few benefit over the many'.⁴⁹ In another article on *The Logo Factory*, Steve Douglas also draws attention to the unethical ways in which the numbers of active, professional, designer participants are constructed.⁵⁰ He points out that 99design's 153,000+ and Crowdspring's 47,000+ members (as listed at his time of writing) actually reflected registered users, not active designers, and included in their numbers competition hosts, as well as members interested in submitting designs. Of these total numbers, only about one third had submitted designs. On Crowdspring, of the approximately fifteen thousand 'designers who have participated', less than two thousand five hundred had submitted more than one design. An analysis of 'last seen' dates suggested that 'the majority of these designers will not be entering a Crowdspring contest again'. Like the construction of members as 'designers' and therefore professional, these figures gloss over the actual numbers of active participants in a way that critics find problematic—and unethical.

Widespread anger at such unethical practices has led to the establishment of a range of anti-spec initiatives. Concerned about the increasing number of legitimate design opportunities being replaced by spec work competitions, NO!SPEC was established to 'interfac[e] with designers, educators, businesses and organizations; ... send protest letters; writ[e] petitions and posts'.⁵¹ Another initiative, AntiSpec, aims to mobilise designers to communicate the anti-spec message.⁵² Its homepage includes numerous thumbnail images of design community leaders and other designers who support the AntiSpec campaign, almost three thousand in total at the time of writing. Another initiative, SpecWatch, takes a different approach. Instead of campaigning against spec work, it presents facts and data relating to spec work, linking to publicly available online sources to verify the information. SpecWatch, like AntiSpec, has close to three thousand followers on Twitter. These numbers, along with the numerous responses to blog posts debating the subject of speculative work, panels such as 'is spec work evil?' at the prestigious digital designers SXWSi (South By South West Interactive) conference, support for the anti-spec movement from significant individuals like Debbie Millman, president of AIGA, are all evidence of the strength of opposition to spec work from within the design profession.

Instead of participating in spec work initiatives, critics advocate *pro bono* work; that is, donating professional expertise, or undertaking professional work, in the full knowledge that no payment will be received (in contrast to spec work, where participants hope to be paid). A shorter version of the phrase *pro bono publico*, or 'for the public good', *pro bono* work is proposed as a more ethical alternative to spec work. In the case of the logo contest for the teen suicide prevention organisation mentioned above, critics suggested that, given the charitable status of the organisation that needed the logo, the client should have approached a designer and asked him or her to produce a logo *pro bono* instead of running a spec work competition.⁵³ Elsewhere, at the end of a presentation about web design workflow at the AnEventApart conference in Chicago in 2009, web designer and author Andy Clarke suggested that, in the time saved by adopting his proposed method, web designers should approach charities and other organisations 'for the public good' and offer their services for free. Designer David Airey adds his voice to this argument:

If you're a designer who thinks that design contests are a good way to practice, think about this: you could head out into the local community instead, and approach non-profits who would be delighted with your help. The benefits are much greater than taking part in any contest; you're guaranteed feedback, you improve your communication skills, your hard work is going towards a good cause, and you're networking with local business owners too (vital if you plan on becoming self-employed).⁵⁴

Not all commentators are equally supportive of *pro bono* work or critical of speculative crowdsourcing, however. Some of those engaging in online debate about the topic cannot comprehend the criticisms of spec work outlined above. 'Spec is being done—and it will continue to be done—by free people making free choices in the pursuit of opportunity', said one respondent to the debate about the teen suicide prevention organisation logo contest.⁵⁵ In response to criticisms of 99designs on designer blog *Positive Space*, another commentator posted this vehement message to the blog owner:

The only reason you have a problem with spec work is because it takes away from YOUR work. In a democratic society, it's up to business leaders/owners to develop new ways to crush the competition. I suggest

you stop whining, and use this energy to find a better way to fatten your pockets.⁵⁶

Steve Douglas acknowledges that arguments such as ‘we’re all adults here’ and ‘it’s our adult choice whether to enter competitions or not’ are common defences of spec work but, as he clearly demonstrates, not all competition entrants are adults.⁵⁷ Proponents of such views appear to accept the increasing precariousness of the creative industries, mentioned earlier, and these industries’ growing dependence both on unpaid labour and on individual designers shouldering the burden of responsibility for dealing with these precarious conditions. A belief in the primacy of the individual is also evident among those commentators who counter criticisms of spec work by arguing that the talent of experienced designers will prevail. One observer on NO!SPEC stated that there is no need for established professional designers to fear competition from inexperienced amateurs in crowdsourced contests, because ‘talent always wins out’.⁵⁸ Such commentators betray a belief in the freedom to self-determine and in the possibility of making it in the creative industries ‘primarily through individual effort and creative talent alone’.⁵⁹ They also appear to lack the values that I argue underlie design professionalism. Thus not all commentators in these debates share the ethical perspectives that underpin the anti-spec position.

—AGAINST AMATEUR ECONOMIES

Without doubt, the rise of amateur economies has led to a range of opportunities for user participation in cultural production, and for creativity and self-expression. But the growth of amateur economies is not without problems. To counterbalance the celebratory rhetoric that has dominated debate to date, this article has focused on a problematic manifestation of amateur economies, spec work competitions, and how these have an impact upon designers’ sense of their own professionalism. It has shown how outsourcing design to the amateur crowd is deemed by many professional designers to devalue their design work. Critics see companies like 99designs, with their \$100 payouts and exploitation of designers’ near voluntary labour, as ethically problematic. Such practices are seen to be unethical in various ways: because they reduce the value of labour in the design process, underpaying designers or not paying them at all; they engage children in design work; and they

promote practices like underbidding, plagiarism or unfair criticism. Instead of designing on spec, some leading designers and anti-spec activists promote the more ethical practice of pro bono work, which has its roots in the idea that professionals should contribute their expertise for the public good. Some commentators in the design community celebrate the alleged freedom to participate in spec work competitions as an integral part of creative self-realisation, while critical voices problematise the reification of talent and freedom that can be found in these celebratory positions. For example, in response to the proposal that individual talent is all that is needed to succeed in design, another commentator responded 'talent is only one small part of what we as designers do. It is not like we instantly dream up these concepts in a minute of creative expression. Intelligent design solutions take time, research, and lots of hard work.'⁶⁰ Thus in response to the anti-anti spec position, the anti-spec voice continues to assert itself.

Designers' responses to crowdsourcing design through spec work competitions can be understood in relation to their ethics and values, and the extent to which they feel that these are thrown into question by different kinds of user activity. The terms of participation in spec work competitions are considered by many designers to be unacceptable and unethical. Here, I have suggested this position does not represent the voices of hysterical workers attempting to protect 'their position at the privileged end of the production value chain', as Bruns puts it.⁶¹ Rather, the anti-spec voice is concerned about what designers consider intolerable working conditions. If professional web designers are worried, it is not about their loss of privilege but about the loss of value, the potential loss of professional ethics and the problematic terms of participation in this particular amateur economy.

Professional designers are usually paid to design and develop products that solve communications problems. They also volunteer sometimes, giving away their labour for free either through pro bono work, blogs and tweets or active membership of online and other communities. But professionals in the cultural and other sectors have always volunteered their skill. For many designers, the specific location of the fruits of their labour between the two poles of volunteerism and professionalism that van Dijck identifies matters less than their professional ethics and values, whether they are paid for their work or not. These professional ethics

and values are clearly undermined when designers are rewarded less than \$3 per submitted design in competition with eleven year olds.

Although the homepage of the AntiSpec website states that the design profession is one of few embroiled in spec work, the problems associated with spec work competitions are mirrored in the wider cultural and creative industries. Precarious working conditions, increased individualisation, low pay and the growing requirement that budding creatives perform what Ross describes as ‘sacrificial labour’ are characteristics of many contemporary creative professions, not just design.⁶² Spec work competitions, like Amazon’s Mechanical Turk, and other companies’ crowdsourcing of creative labour such as oDesk and Freelancer, all play a role in normalising such troubling working conditions. The discourses which legitimise these practices speak the language of individualisation, through their appeal to individual effort, talent and ambition. As Perlin suggests, such discourses fit neatly with ‘the go-go rhetoric of the dotcom bubble’.⁶³ Perlin also points to the complicity of universities in the production of discount labour, through their credit-carrying internship programs. As academics, researchers and/or cultural critics, we need to reflect on our role in this ‘race to the bottom’, and recognise there is good reason to line up alongside the anti-spec movement, against such forms of amateur economy.⁶⁴

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